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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"

It's been another one of those typical New England weeks, as far as the weather is concerned - sunny and warm days, and thunderstorms in the late afternoon or early evening. Actually, these are nice days, unless you had afternoon barbecues planned!

It's been a busy week. Getting more done in the yard - just a few minor projects left to go and I'm done, or at least until something else comes up! Things are looking up on the landscaping front, finally.

Not much else to report this week. A little golfing and a little working. Then add in some much-needed sleep, and that was it! We're getting ready for the long 4th of July weekend coming up. My mother-in-law is coming for a visit, and my father and brother may pop in for a day during that week. I definitely have to start planning my barbecue schedule because there's going to be a lot of food on the grill all week. Hmmm, now I'm getting hungry, so I'm going to raid the fridge!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, again this week, there aren't a lot of messages in the NewsGroup, but I wanted to send something out to you anyway, since the Fourth of July is coming up and people are spending more time outside and on the road.

There was also an interesting story in the news this past week about 'Atari' trying to suppress a bad review.

Of course, it's not the Atari you or I remember. Today's Atari is nothing more than a name. It's not an industry leader with fresh ideas that are going to turn the gaming or computer world on its ear. It's a name and a logo. Sadly, that's about all it is.

The controversy seems to center around a review someone wrote about a game called 'Alone and in the Dark', and a couple of websites who've done pre-release reviews have been generally unflattering about it.

Now, I don't know if it's common practice today to review games in various stages of completion, but that never struck me as a good way to get an accurate picture of the version the public was going to see.

The only way to get an accurate picture of the version the public is going to be able to buy is to view THAT version. Yes, that means you usually have to wait until shortly before the game is released but, as one of my nieces is fond of saying, them's the breaks.

Anyway, Atari didn't like the tenor of these reviews and canceled an ad deal with at least one of the websites. Then they went ahead and sued one of the websites, claiming that they had a 'pirate' version of the game. And, let's face it; they probably did/do.

My problem with this whole thing is that 'Atari' probably wouldn't have had a problem with them having a pirate copy if the review had been even marginally positive. And where, I wonder, did they GET this pirate copy?

I suppose that the Atari that you and I were familiar with would have been similar to today's incarnation in some respects... they never really did 'fess up to their mistakes, they worked themselves into metaphorical corners one after another and comforted themselves with the thought that they weren't losing TOO badly to the competition... at least not much more than they were LAST quarter.

Maybe the next 'phase' of the gaming/computing world will bring about a new Atari. Maybe it'll be a winner with some of that old magic that you and I remember.

Well, enough of that. Let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup:
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Guillaume Tello finds a 1040 STF with an expansion board and describes it to us:

"Here's what I've found:

http://pagesperso-orange.fr/gtello/new.htm

The inside is dirty, no metal cover. I'll have to clean it before switching it on to test the computer. The mother has little modifications: 3 resistors cut and a strap.

I have added another photo, closer.
http://pagesperso-orange.fr/gtello/new.htm

Looks like there are only 4 ram chips for 4Mb... So 1Mb cache? Was it possible at the time?"

Gˆ ´¶tz Hoffart tells Guillaume:

"If you could *write* *here* what is written on the RAM chips we could possibly tell you if this is the case."

Guillaume tells Gˆ ´¶tz:

"So what I'll call the IC controller (40 pins) is labeled:
C025914-38A
PH23-024
7M2-10

And each of the 4 RAM chips (20 pins):
M5M44400AL
115SD50-8

That's it!"

Gˆ ´¶tz fills Guillaume in on the RAM chips:

"This is a 1Mx4 FP MITSUBISHI RAM chip with each 4 MBit which gives you 2048 KBytes total for your 4 chips."

Guillaume replies:

"Thanks, so what reported SYSINF83 was right, 2,5Mb. Okay!!

But it is a 1040 with full ram on the mother board, so I expected bank0: 1024kb, am I right?

And the expansion board says 4MB exp ram, so, why only 2048? Is there a software driver with this board to configure correctly the RAM?"

Mark Bedinfgield explains to Guillaume:

"There is 512k per bank. 1040 and 520 is Bank0 512k, 1040 is Bank1 512k. So 2.5MB is correct.

I had a Marpet board that used a similar PCB. You might have to track down the instructions to see if the second bank is usable. It is also possible that it is only a 2mb board. It may be that the designers just used a single PCB for 2/4mb ram."

Well folks, that's really all there is for this week. If you're reading this "a week late", please be careful out there on the road over the holiday weekend. If you're reading this "on time", then stock up on the beer and bratwurst, shock the pool water, tidy up the lawn and get all the little things out of the way so that you can just kick back and enjoy the holiday. We'll talk more next week about WHY it's a holiday. In the meantime, keep your back to the wall, your hand on the wheel, your eye on the horizon and, by all means, keep your ears open so that you'll hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - 'Bad Company' Not An Elite Squad!
Nintendo Owners Can Rock Out!
Life With PlayStation!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

'Bad Company' Not An Elite Squad, But Still Finds The Target

The allure of most military shooters is assuming the helm of an elite, highly-skilled soldier. Then there's Battlefield: Bad Company.

In Electronic Arts' army caper, you join a crew of military rejects in a satisfying campaign that grows more engaging once taken online.

As Preston Marlowe, you're assigned to the 222nd Army Stallion, B-Company, a squad of screw-ups and troublemakers chosen to serve as a first wave of offense. B-Company is in the middle of a futuristic war against Russia. The team eventually goes AWOL after discovering stashes of gold throughout the region.

New to the Battlefield series are destructible environments. Instead of chasing enemies into a house to take them out, you can blow a hole into the side of the building and destroy their cover. Watching walls get decimated as you dart away from enemy fire boosts the intensity. But don't expect complete destruction. Some buildings fail to budge no matter how many shots from a rocket launcher.

Developer DICE has created an incredible arsenal with which to wreak mayhem. Besides a robust selection of guns, players can use RPGs, grenade launchers, mortar and air strikes, tanks and a host of other weapons to tear through opposing armies. Bad Company incorporates a collection system where new weapons are unlocked as you find them on the battlefield.

Explosions look and sound powerful. Trees tumble as tanks rumble through the game's greener landscapes. Sandbags fly through the air after bunkers take strikes from heavy weaponry.

Overall, the Bad Company campaign is solid, yet not as gripping as military blockbusters like a Call of Duty 4 or Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter.

Part of the problem is artificial intelligence. Your Bad Company cohorts live up to their name. They offer little help. On a couple occasions, I watched teammates run past an enemy without even a shot fired. Prepare to do almost all the work.

Computer-controlled foes aren't any better. They're wildly inconsistent in their attack patterns. Sometimes, they'll flank and maintain aggressiveness. Other times, you have to chase them down. There were moments where enemies waited seconds before firing.

Bad Company doesn't penalize you too hard for dying. Always at your disposal is an injector that replenishes life. When you do perish, you won't start over at the checkpoint. Instead, you'll respawn with the environment as it was right before you die.

Bad Company redeems itself with a simple yet addictive multiplayer. Players only have one mode to choose: Gold Rush (A Conquest mode will become available for a future download).

In Gold Rush, you'll play as an Attacker or Defender. As Attacker, you must destroy enemy stashes of gold. As Defender, you must protect your treasures. Similar to Call of Duty 4 , players choose a soldier class with a specific set of weapons. As you improve, you'll move up in rank and gain credits toward unlocking weapons. Multiplayer battles can accommodate up to 24 players, 12 per team.

Is Bad Company unfit for duty? Definitely not, especially when you consider a deep weapons set and fun multiplayer. If it wanted to compete with the elite, however, Bad Company could've use a little more time in basic training.

Nintendo Owners Get Their Chance To Rock Out

Nintendo enthusiasts hit the musical jackpot this week with two new games to release their inner rock stars.

"Guitar Hero: On Tour" ($49.99, Activision) for the Nintendo DS marks the popular series' first venture onto a portable platform, while "Rock Band" ($169.99, MTV Games) finally reaches the Wii so drummers and vocalists can join the band.

Taking a game built around a full-sized guitar peripheral and adapting it for a handheld is no easy task, but "Guitar Hero: On Tour" aces this solo.

Substituting for the ax is a glove-like guitar grip that plugs into the DS's seldom used GamePak slot. It features four colored buttons instead of the standard "Guitar Hero" five (I never liked that fifth button anyhow) and includes a nifty guitar pick stylus so players can strum the touch screen while notes scroll down the secondary screen.

The game's 25 tracks include a mix of newer hits ("This Love" by Maroon 5, "All The Small Things" by Blink-182) and older titles ("Pride and Joy" by Stevie Ray Vaughan, "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" by Pat Benatar).

Earphones are a must, as the DS's internal speakers don't provide enough volume to truly rock out.

Single-player career mode can kill plenty of hours, but the game really shines in multiplayer mode, though both players must have their own cartridge and grip.

The game offers co-op and face-off modes, but duels provide the most fun with creative new battle attacks that take advantage of the DS touch screen.

Hit your opponents with pyrotechnics to force them to blow into the internal mic and put out the flames. Annoying fans pop in demanding players give an autograph before getting back to the show.

And instead of just repeatedly hitting a button to fix a broken string as in the console titles, players must use the stylus to attach the end of the string and drag it up the neck to get that note back up and running. Very clever.

"Guitar Hero: On Tour" has got to be one of the best titles to hit the DS this year.

Four out of four stars.

Wii owners have been clamoring for their version of "Rock Band" ever since the title debuted on the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 in November.

Sure, the Wii edition lacks some of the online features found on those other consoles, but developer Harmonix made sure it got the gameplay right with this port.

The "Rock Band" package includes a drum kit and microphone, which plug into an included USB hub, and a wireless Fender Stratocaster guitar controller that transmits to a USB dongle. Add in an additional guitar controller as a bass ($59.99) and you’ve got a four-piece band.

Players can choose to rock out on a collection of 63 songs such as "Gimme Shelter" by The Rolling Stones, "Enter Sandman" by Metallica and "Say It Ain’t So" by Weezer.

For gamers who have played their share of "Guitar Hero" titles, the big draw here is the drum set. You get to use a real pair of sticks to pound on four colored touch pads while interspersing some pedal stomps on the kick drum. Very cathartic - especially when you get to break into a freestyle drum solo.

The drums are clearly the most challenging of the instruments as notes can come at you fast, but it gets easier once you get a feel of the rhythm.

Singing works just like a "Karaoke Revolution" game, with lyrics horizontally scrolling on a staff at the top of the screen. Keep the flying triangle on each scrolling tube by singing on key and you’ll be rewarded with points.

A long solo can provide an awkward pause for singers, so the game uses percussion breaks to help keep the vocalist occupied. Just tap the mic like you’re playing a tambourine or cowbell.

Playing lead or bass guitar is just like in "Guitar Hero." React to the scrolling notes by pressing the correct colored buttons while hitting the strum bar. The "Rock Band" guitar controllers sport an additional set of fret buttons up on the neck to make it easier to tackle quick

solo sequences.

"Rock Band" really shows its stuff with two or more players, as no other game comes close to letting gamers experience the camaraderie of playing in a band.

Players in cooperative mode are scored as a group, although an individual poor performance can result in that player getting booted for the rest of the song. When that happens, another player can break into overdrive to bring the lost soul back into the mix.

On the positive side, unison phrases invite band members to earn bonus points if everyone in the group can play the phrases perfectly.

Unlike the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 versions, there’s no option to create and customize characters, although that’s a feature I don’t find that important. Slightly more disappointing is the Wii version’s lack of online play and downloadable songs. The company expects to offer an expansion pack with 20 additional songs next month for $29.99.

Three-and-a-half out of four stars.

’Clank,’ ’Hot Shots’ Keep PSP Humming

The PlayStation Portable has been around for three years, but the machine you might buy today is far different from the one you’d get in 2005. Sony is continually tinkering with the thing in big ways (introducing a lighter, slimmer model in 2007) and small (any number of regularly issued firmware updates).

You can do a lot more on a PSP than just play games and movies. You can make phone calls through the Skype service. You can access Web pages. You can listen to music, through downloads or Internet radio. You can connect to device to a TV in order to play games on a bigger screen. A GPS device is on the way.

So the PSP is multitalented, but it doesn’t do any one thing quite as well as dedicated devices do. It’s still, first and foremost, a game machine. Its game library continues to grow, and while it doesn’t have as many diverse a selection as the Nintendo DS, its AAA titles look spectacular.

* "Secret Agent Clank" (Sony, for the PSP, $39.99): Here’s the second PSP spinoff of Sony’s great "Ratchet & Clank" franchise, which the High Impact Games studio has successfully shrunk to fit a 4.3-inch screen. Clank, the robot half of the duo, is the star this time, and his droll wit is as charming as ever.

Ratchet has been falsely imprisoned, so the tuxedo-clad Clank’s on a solo mission to clear his pal’s name. As usual, there’s a robust assortment of clever weapons and gadgets, like exploding cufflinks and bow-tie boomerangs. Some sequences reward stealth, but it’s usually more fun to fight than sneak. There are also sections where Clank dances, pilots a speedboat or tries to get the brain-dead Gadge-Bots to do his bidding, so there’s plenty of variety.

The animation is very good, about even with the PlayStation 2 "R&C"

games, and the story is endearingly silly. I did miss the repartee between the two leads, but the cowardly Captain Qwark makes the most of his cameo. "Secret Agent Clank" doesn't have the depth of its parent series, but its fast-paced levels are well suited for portable play. Three stars out of four.

* "Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee 2" (Sony, for the PSP, $29.99): With the "Hot Shots" series, developer Clap Hanz has turned the usually sluggish game of golf into one of the zippiest video-game sports. The original "Open Tee" was the most addictive of the PSP's launch titles, and the follow-up is just as satisfying.

The ultra-simple swing system involves pressing the X button three times: once to start, once for power, once for accuracy. You can learn more precise techniques as the game progresses, although I did miss the advanced swing mechanism introduced in "HSG: Out of Bounds" on the PlayStation 3. You can also improve your power, accuracy and spin by completing tasks in the game's challenge mode.

Success also lets you unlock 12 courses and 12 characters, and there are dozens of items to collect as you roam the fairways. You can finish nine holes in about 10 minutes, but you'll always be tempted to start just one more round as you search for an elusive accessory. "Open Tee 2" is the best portable golf game on the market, and I suspect I'll be carrying my PSP around a lot more because of it. Three stars.

* "R-Type Command" (Atlus, for the PSP, $39.99): "R-Type" is one of the all-time great outer-space shoot-'em-ups, but this spinoff is a much more laid-back tactical game. You start each level by placing an assortment of spaceships on a hex-filled grid; the objective, generally, is to reach a particular spot on the grid or to destroy your opponent's flagship.

Strategy lovers will eat this up, but others may find it baffling thanks to a complete lack of tutorials or any other onscreen help. The battles are well-balanced, though, challenging yet fair, and patient players will come to appreciate the versatility of the spacecraft.

But patience is the key. "R-Type Command" moves very slowly, and battles take half-an-hour or more. The levels do get repetitious, and the opponent's artificial intelligence sometimes takes forever to complete its turn. If you're nostalgic for the frenzy of classic "R-Type," you'd be better off rejecting this "Command." Two stars.

Sony Will Offer News, Weather, Video Through PlayStation

In addition to keeping up with battles on alien planets, PlayStation 3 will soon be able to help you stay current with planet Earth. On Thursday, Sony Computer Entertainment President Kazuo Hirai announced both Life with PlayStation, a service that allows users to see current news and weather around the world through a spinning-globe menu, and a PS3 download service for movies, music and TV shows.

Life with PlayStation will "bring unique content centering on two axes, place and time," Hirai said.

The interface includes a globe that the user can spin, showing different

parts of the planet. News headlines and weather conditions related to indicated cities can be accessed via the globe, and Sony reportedly has said the globe will also feature weather-satellite images of cloud patterns. No release date for Life with PlayStation was set.

Hirai also said Sony intends to add the capability for users to store their own photos and movies according to where and when they were recorded, and then also use the globe - plus some sort of selector for time - to find them.

But personal movies are not the only movies PS3 intends to offer. Hirai also confirmed that the long-expected movie-download service for PS3 will be launched this summer in the U.S., with later dates in Japan and Europe.

An official announcement is expected at the big E3 trade show in July. The service would compete with Video Marketplace on Microsoft's Xbox 360, Apple's iTunes Store movie service, and others. At the moment, no agreements have been announced with any major studios - other than an expected deal with the company's own Sony Pictures.

The download service is also expected to roll out to other consumer-electronics devices, including computers, Bravia LCD TVs, mobile phones, and portable video players. There are some reports indicating the downloaded content can be moved from one device to another.

Michael Gartenberg, an analyst with JupiterResearch, noted that these moves by Sony are "about the evolution of the game console into something more." He pointed out that Sony, as well as Microsoft and Nintendo, have been talking for quite a while about using their advanced game consoles as an entertainment hub.

Gartenberg described this approach as resembling a Trojan horse, because people are currently buying the consoles to play games, not to watch movies or news. Even once a console is in the house, he noted, normal behavior patterns "are not to flip on the PlayStation to check the weather."

But he noted that, "historically, these things start slowly," and Sony might be able to encourage different patterns of behavior over time. Ultimately, he said, it's about content, and "if you can't deliver content, people will go elsewhere."

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

New Internet Domain Names in 2009: ICANN

Internet users should soon be able to use new domain names such as .love, .paris or .bank if one of the world wide web's biggest shakeups

is approved this week as expected by the web regulator ICANN.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which opened its annual general meeting Monday in Paris, was due to vote on the new names this week.

"Apart from the .com, .net or .org, the 1.3 billion web users will be able from early 2009 to acquire generic addresses by lodging common words such as .love, .hate or .city or proper names," ICANN president Paul Twomey told French newspaper Les Echos.

The meeting has gathered more than 1,300 delegates from 130 countries.

ICANN, a non-profit organization based in southern California, oversees the assignment of domain names and internet protocol addresses that help computers communicate.

Get Ready for .smith, .sports or .love on the Web

Internet regulators on Thursday voted to relax rules on domain names like .com or .edu, which could pave the way for companies or individuals to create an array of new addresses for the Web.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or Icann, also approved measures that will allow top-level domain names to be written in scripts such as Arabic or Cyrillic.

Top-level domain names, or TLDs, refer to Internet name suffixes, such as the ubiquitous .com, .net and .org, among others. Currently, there are more than 200 TLDs, which also include the two-character country codes used by websites, such as Britain’s .uk.

"This is a historic resolution," said Peter Dengate Thrush, chairman of Icann’s board. "It’s going to make a big difference to how the Internet looks and works."

Icann officials said some technical issues for the new system must still be worked out, but it could be reviewing the first applications for new TLDs as early as next spring. The application fee is expected to cost more than $100,000.

Under the new system, individuals, companies or groups could apply to have any string of letters established as a domain name. It could be a vanity name, for example - .smith - or a category name like .sports or .perfume. A company could also change its domain to reflect its brand, so Apple.com could become Apple.mac, for instance.

Straightforward applications will be approved quickly, officials said. A review process would be undertaken for controversial strings, such as those that infringe on existing trademarks, or appear to be too similar to existing TLDs, or raise moral objections.

Icann adopted the new rules after a meeting in Paris.

Icahn Aims for Yahoo Fireworks Before July 4

Investor activist Carl Icahn is expected to file his definitive proxy by July 4, signaling whether he will ultimately run a dissident slate of directors to unseat a majority of Yahoo’s nine board members, or look to oust just a few, according to sources familiar with the billionaire investor.

Icahn is gearing up to share another round on his "views about Yahoo and its management shortly," according to a posting on his Icahn Report blog Friday .

Icahn, who filed another preliminary proxy just the other day, has yet to file his definitive proxy. The definitive proxy will list the final number and names of candidates Icahn wants to run against Yahoo’s nine-member board when it holds its annual shareholders meeting on August 1. That definitive proxy will indicate whether Icahn seeks majority control of Yahoo’s board seats, or minority representation.

As part of any proxy filing process, a dissident shareholder may face some back-and-forth discussions with the Securities and Exchange Commission, prior to filing their definitive proxy. And, as one would expect, a dissident shareholder would be loath to disregard any SEC comments before filing their definitive proxy.

In his Friday blog post, Icahn notes:

Many of you have been asking me about Yahoo. Please remember I am in the middle of a proxy fight. A proxy fight involves a complicated process of SEC approvals, federal securities laws, filing requirements and a great deal of time and money.

At this time, due to SEC regulations, I do not intend to post your comments regarding the proxy fight. However, I am planning to give you my views about Yahoo and its management shortly. If you wish to be informed I invite you to subscribe. Stay tuned.

Meanwhile, a portfolio manager with Yahoo’s third largest investor, Legg Mason Capital Management, expressed reservations Friday about supporting an Icahn board unless the billionaire investor activist can develop a "Plan B" should Microsoft fail to do a deal with the search company, according to a Reuters report.

Robert Hagstrom, a portfolio manager with Legg Mason Growth Trust, was quoted by Reuters at the Chicago Morningstar annual investment conference as saying:

"Icahn has got three things. He wants to fire Jerry, eliminate the severance package and he wants to force the sale...If he can’t force Microsoft to buy them, what’s plan B? I need a plan B. And if you are going to fire Jerry, who do you hire?"

Meanwhile, some Yahoo investors like Eric Jackson are calling on Icahn to run a minority slate of dissident directors, in an effort to increase his chances of getting representation on the Yahoo board.

Jackson, as well as a source with a proxy solicitation firm, noted that it may be difficult for Icahn to win control of Yahoo’s board should no deal with Microsoft loom on the horizon. But even with a minority slate, Icahn may find success in pushing for change from within.

Another option is for Icahn to run a full nine-member dissident slate and hope that proxy advisory firms, such as RiskMetrics, Glass Lewis & Co., and Proxy Governance, advise their institutional investor clients use Icahn's gold proxy card, rather than Yahoo's white proxy card, and vote for all of his nominees.

But absent these advisory services advocating for electing all of Icahn's dissident directors, the investor activist may find these advisory services may be willing to recommended that some of his candidates get elected, noted one source.

Microsoft Extends Support for Windows XP to 13 Years

With many business and individual PC users rejecting Windows Vista, Microsoft took an unprecedented step this week by promising support for Windows XP for a full 13 years. That is three years longer than it has allowed for previous Windows operating systems.

In a letter sent to customers this week, Bill Veghte, a Microsoft vice president, also seemed to confirm that Windows 7 will be released in 2010. That OS, Veghte wrote, will ship "approximately three years" after Vista became available in January 2007.

Meantime, security patches and updates to Windows XP will be provided until April 2014, Veghte promised. In what could be considered an understatement, he wrote, "Our ongoing support for Windows XP is the result of our recognition that people keep their Windows-based PCs for many years."

Many large businesses have avoided upgrading to Windows Vista, which has been plagued with widely publicized problems, including incompatibilities with drivers for legacy hardware and applications. Upgrading to Vista could also be very expensive for enterprises that would need to upgrade older hardware. Many businesses and individuals have opted to buy Windows XP on new PCs.

While June 30 remains the cutoff date for selling Windows XP, retailers such as Dell are still selling preconfigured PCs with XP. And enterprises with volume licensing contracts will still be able to install XP even on new machines.

In addition, Microsoft has promoted a licensing loophole that allows new hardware buyers to purchase Windows Vista and then downgrade it to a previous version of Windows. Microsoft has cited such purchases as evidence of support for Vista, but many Web postings have disputed that.

"It's true that we will stop selling Windows XP as a retail packaged product and stop licensing it directly to major PC manufacturers," Veghte's letter says. "But customers who still need Windows XP will be able to get it."

Microsoft will also continue to sell a version of Windows XP to makers of low-cost computers through June 2010. Such machines as the Asus Eee PC are incapable of running Vista and the alternative would be for the makers to install open-source Linux as the operating system.

AMD Brings Back All-in-Wonder Card

AMD’s ATI division on Thursday brought back the All-in-Wonder card line that it killed in 2006, adding the All-in-Wonder HD card to its lineup.

The $199 card will be manufactured by Diamond Multimedia and Visiontek by late July. It includes both the ATI TV Wonder HD technology as well as the Radeon HD 3650 graphics technology.

The All-in-Wonder received its last update in 2005.

The All-in-WonderHD was launched a day after AMD announced the ATI Radeon HD 4850, plus the first graphics card featuring ultra high bandwidth GDDR5 memory, the ATI Radeon HD 4870. The cards are priced at $199 and $299, respectively. AMD claimed that the HD 4850 card offers a teraflop worth of performance, and represented a 2X performance jump over the ATI Radeon HD 3800 GPU, "the biggest generational increase since the game-changing launch of the Radeon 9700 in 2002," according to Rick Bergman, the general manager of the graphics products group at AMD.

The HD 4870 is clocked at 750-MHz, contains 512 Mbytes of GDDR5 memory clocked at 3 Gbit/s, and consumes 160 watts. The HD 4850 is clocked at 625 MHz, also contains 512 Mbytes of GDDR3 memory clocked at 2 Gbits/s, and consumes 110 watts of power. Both cards use PCI Express 2.0.

The PCI Express 2.0-based All-in-Wonder HD card, meanwhile, includes unified decoder technology for hardware-accelerated Blu-ray playback, and records and captures both HDTV and analog signals using ATI Theater 650 Pro hardware MPEG-2 encoding. Dual DVI connectors are included, and HDMI support has also been added. HDCP support, however, has apparently not been included.

AMD’s Catalyst Media Center provides a front end to scheduling recordings, while a second bundled AMD LIVE! "Entertainment Suite CD" allows a user to access the DVR capabilities over the Internet with a broadband connection.

Bill Gates Moves On, But Microsoft Keeps His ’Quests’ Alive

It is almost unthinkable that any one human could pick up where Bill Gates leaves off when he ends his full-time tenure Friday as Microsoft’s leader.

But as Gates bones up on epidemiology at his charitable foundation, the software company he built with a mix of visionary manifestos and extreme hands-on management must still wake up Monday to face hard problems even he could not solve. Among them: beating Google Inc. on the Web while fending off its attacks on desktop computing.

When Microsoft Corp. announced in 2006 that Gates planned to go part-time as board chairman, so he could spend more time on his global health charity, it named two senior executives to guide the company’s overall technical direction.

Gates' recent remarks, however, indicate Microsoft is looking to a much larger group of employees for big-picture guidance and long-term planning. But it's not yet clear whether the company can replicate his thinking with more traditional corporate processes - or whether it should even be trying.

From Microsoft's start in 1975, Gates has been the company's genius programmer, its technology guru, its primary decision maker and its ruthless and competitive leader. He would famously disappear into the solitude of a country cabin to digest employee-written papers and ponder the future of the industry, then emerge with manifestos, including the 1995 "Internet Tidal Wave" memo, that could shift the focus of the entire company.

He is credited by analysts and academics for the emergence of software as a moneymaking industry; previously it had been a pastime for hobbyists or a subset of the hardware sector. He is revered by many engineers, despite his propensity to fling expletives at underlings whose ideas he scorned. And he has built Microsoft into a hugely successful monopoly that has only grown stronger despite major losses in antitrust trials in the U.S. and Europe.

At a May gathering of chief executive officers at Microsoft's Redmond, Wash., headquarters, Gates outlined how he hoped to translate the work once done within the singular confines of his brain into the sort of group projects that could be managed with the company's own collaboration software.

"We've created a thing we called quests, where we divided our types of customers down, and we got the best thinkers on these things, both the very practical people who are with the customers, the engineers who write the code, and the researchers who may be more unbound in terms of their timeframe and imagination, and put them together," Gates said.

The actual substance of the quests - which sound more Knights-of-the-Round-Table than bleeding-edge-technology - is blurry. Microsoft refused to answer questions about the subject or make Gates available for an interview. Even an analyst who was briefed under a nondisclosure agreement walked away confused.

But some details can be gleaned from Gates' comments to the CEOs and offhand references to the quests in other recent speeches. In May, Gates said the company started the quests in the last few years, to help it separate its five or 10-year plans from the regular product development cycle.

Quests are broken into five categories, based on different clumps of customers. A PowerPoint slide accompanying his talk paired each customer group with a jargony description - "Connected, informed & productive," for information workers; "Efficient and in control" for information-technology professionals.

Gates did not give any examples of specific quests, though in 2006 and 2007 speeches he referred to the Tablet PC, an innovation he has championed for a decade but which has failed to catch on in the mainstream, as a quest.

He described the process to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in February 2007 like this: "Online, we publish what we call 'quests' ... and let anybody in the company who sees that, who thinks it's stupid or they

think they can contribute to it, come online, and we have the equivalent of a blog-type environment where people put up their ideas."

Last summer at the Microsoft Worldwide Partner Conference in Denver, CEO Steve Ballmer said the company had a list of about 70 quests. Ballmer mentioned a handful, all of them the pet projects Gates has hammered on for years: "What's the future of reading look like? What does the future of television look like? How does voice and natural language wind up as a fundamental part of the user interface metaphor for these computers and for these systems? How eventually do we get all handwriting, reading, and annotation done on the computer?"

Paul DeGroot, an analyst at the independent research group Directions on Microsoft, said the company briefed him on the quests and that they represent Microsoft "basically replacing just one man with a collection of primarily technical people, engineers and product groups."

If the quests are as deeply tied to Gates' own ideas about the future as indicated by the few examples Ballmer mentioned, Microsoft may be in trouble.

After all, even with Gates himself at the helm, Microsoft has yet to solve critical competitive headaches. The Internet has changed the means of distributing desktop software applications and even challenged the idea that they're necessary. Microsoft has scrambled to catch up in music players, and remains an also-ran with its Zune. The most recent Windows Vista operating system landed with a thud. And Microsoft has stumbled badly in Web search and advertising, culminating in Ballmer's quixotic, $47.5 billion pursuit of Yahoo Inc.

"Some of the technical folks may even be better suited than Gates to lead the company into the next generation of computing," said Michael Silver, an analyst for Gartner who has covered Microsoft for a decade. "Some would say that maybe he had too much power ... Some would say Microsoft hasn't failed enough, hasn't gone out on enough limbs and been as innovative as they could have been."

As a result, perpetuating Gates' thinking may leave the company ill-equipped to handle big changes in the software industry, said George Colony, founder and CEO of Forrester Research.

"They will stay in the shadow of Bill Gates, or not make any fundamental changes. Or they will take a deep breath and say, 'We'll do it the way we want to do it,'" Colony said. "You may want to break from the past, not try and replicate the past."

Electronic Health Record Standards Agreed

A major consumer group, insurers together with Google Inc and Microsoft Corp said on Wednesday they have agreed to standards intended to speed adoption of personal electronic health records.

The electronic medical record field remains in its infancy. While U.S. privacy laws govern actions by medical providers such as doctors, there is little in the way of other established privacy, security and data usage standards despite decades of industry efforts.

Backers, which also include some doctors and employer groups, said they hope to break a stalemate in moving medical records online, sparked by consumer fears that their personal information will be abused, or held against them.

"A policy and privacy logjam ... has constricted some of the consumer uptake of these services," said James Dempsey, deputy director at the Center for Democracy and Technology, a privacy rights group that accepts some industry funding.

Principles for personal health records include an audit trail to track use of the data, a dispute resolution process for consumers who believe their personal information has been misused and a ban on using data to discriminate in employment.

Also signing on to the principles are WebMD Health Corp; Consumers Union, which publishes Consumer Reports; seniors' lobbying group AARP; and America's Health Insurance Plans, representing big insurers such as Aetna Inc.

But not all groups agreed the framework would be progress. The American Civil Liberties Union called the effort an "after-the-fact approach."

"Their approach is build a system and we'll find out about privacy after the fact," ACLU Senior Legislative Counsel Tim Sparapani said.

Separately, lawmakers in the U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday debated a bill to set up a national coordinator for health information and encourage adoption of electronic technology.

A companion bill is working its way through the Senate, though its prospects are unclear. Concerns over privacy protections for consumers have stalled progress.

The ACLU objects to the current version of the bill because it lacks language letting patients review their own files and correct bad data.

Experts say the fragmented nature of the health care system, in which most doctors still use paper records and most patients do not have access to their own personal health information, has stalled adoption of digital health records.

But Microsoft this month announced that Kaiser Permanente, the biggest U.S. health maintenance organization, will use Microsoft's HealthVault platform to link Kaiser employees who volunteer to have their records transferred.

Google sells Google Health, a U.S. health data service that combines the leading Web company's search services with a user's personal health records online.

Antispam Group Outlines Defenses to Block Botnet Spam

A major antispam organization is pushing a set of new best practices for ISPs (Internet service providers) to stop increasing volumes of spam from botnets.

The guidelines, from the Messaging Anti-Abuse Working Group (MAAWG), were drawn up at a meeting in Germany last week and deal with forwarded e-mail and e-mail that is sent from dynamic IP (Internet Protocol) addresses.

Many people forward their e-mail from one address to another, a relay that goes through their ISPs mail server. But many ISPs use automated tools that could begin blocking further e-mail to an address if a large volume of e-mail has come through. Legitimate messages would be blocked, too.

"If a spammer targets AOL, a lot of people have AOL addresses redirected somewhere else," said Richard D.G. Cox, CIO for Spamhaus, an antispam organization that's a member of MAAWG. "So if a whole lot of spam is coming out of AOL, people will block it on automated basis."

ISPs can fix this by separating the servers that receive e-mail and ones that then forward e-mail. That way, ISPs can filter out spam coming into the accounts before forwarding, taking a look at the messages and spotting which ones came from dodgy domains, Cox said.

Also, servers receiving forwarded e-mail can be confident that the server where mail was sent from is trusted and legitimate. As of now, only a few ISPs are taking steps to fix the forwarding problem, Cox said.

"This is something we need a big takeup on," Cox said. "When everyone does it, more of us will benefit as well."

MAAWG's second recommendation deals with the long-standing problem of PCs that have been infected with malicious software that send spam.

The PCs are part of botnets, or networks of computers that have been compromised by hackers. After a PC is infected, it will often start sending spam through port 25 straight onto the Internet. That contrasts with legitimate e-mail, which usually goes through the ISP's mail server first before being sent on.

Many ISPs assign a different IP address to a subscriber's PC when they connect to the Internet, known as a dynamic IP address. Those infected machines on dynamic IP addresses aren't always automatically blocked by ISPs. Other receiving e-mail servers can block the particular IP address, but many malware programs are designed to reboot a PC in order to get assigned a fresh dynamic IP address from which to continue sending spam, Cox said.

MAAWG's primary suggestion for ISPs is to block all machines on dynamic IP addresses that are sending e-mail on port 25 outside their own network unless there are special, legitimate circumstances. The idea has been "very central" to antispam fighters, Cox said.

But MAAWG said that idea may not be possible for some ISPs, and its guidelines offer another alternative: ISPs should share information about their dynamic address space. That would let other ISPs refine their spam filters.

Spamhaus publishes its own DNS Blacklist, with information on ISPs' dynamic address ranges. "Listing your addresses in a dynamic IP list makes those ranges less attractive to spammers because they know they can't deliver to many networks which use those lists," according to Spamhaus' Web site.

Those on dynamic IPs are allowed to send e-mail using port 587, which is dedicated to sending e-mail via servers that require authentication first. That’s the way most employees, for example, remotely connect to their company’s mail servers, Cox said.

Major ISPs such as Comcast in the U.S. do block unauthorized e-mail on port 25 from going straight to the Internet, but about half of other ISPs-- many located outside Western countries-- do not, Cox said.

"That’s the area where we are pointing the finger at," Cox said.

Given the international scope of the spam game, spammers use the infected computers "to send their unwanted traffic to mail servers around the world," MAAWG said.

Hackers Hijack, Redirect IANA and ICANN Web Sites

Hackers calling themselves NetDevilz temporarily hijacked the sites of key organizations that control routing of Internet traffic and redirected them to a taunting page.

Visitors to the sites for the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) were temporarily redirected Thursday morning. The sites affected were iana.com, iana-servers.com, icann.com and icann.net, according to researchers at Zone-h.org, which monitors attacks.

A message at the bogus site said, "You think that you control the domains but you don’t! Everybody knows wrong. We control the domains including ICANN! Don’t you believe us?"

IANA is responsible for managing the domain-name root system that translates domain names like newsfactor.com into IP addresses. ICANN oversees IANA.

The sites were redirected to the same IP address used last week in an attack on Photobucket.

Wards Didn’t Tell Consumers About Credit Card Hack

An old name in retail was hit by a modern scourge - a hack of its customers’ credit card numbers - but didn’t inform the consumers, revealing how data breaches might be heavily undercounted even with new notification laws.

At least 51,000 records were exposed in the breach at the parent company of Montgomery Ward. The venerable Wards chain that began in 1872 went out of business in 2001, but in 2004 a catalog company, Direct Marketing Services Inc., bought the brand name out of bankruptcy. It now runs a Wards.com Web site along with six other sites, including three with Sears brands it has acquired: SearsHomeCenter.com, SearsShowplace.com and SearsRoomforKids.com.

Direct Marketing Services' CEO, David Milgrom, said the financial company Citigroup detected the computer invasion in December. By going through HomeVisions.com, another Direct Marketing Services site, hackers had plundered the database that holds account information for all the company's retail properties.

Milgrom said Direct Marketing Services immediately informed its payment processor and Visa and MasterCard. Then, Milgrom said, Direct Marketing Services closely followed a set of guidelines, issued by Visa, on how to respond to a security breach. That included a report to the U.S. Secret Service. He said he believed by the end of December that Direct Marketing Services had met its obligations.

However, those guidelines from Visa are largely technical, and they do not cover a key additional step: that notification laws in nearly every state generally require organizations that have been hacked to come clean to the affected consumers, not just to the financial industry.

Companies that fail to comply can be hit with fines or be sued by affected customers, depending on the state.

As a result, scores of breaches covering hundreds of millions of consumer accounts have been disclosed by banks, universities, corporations and retailers in recent years.

After being asked about those laws by The Associated Press, Milgrom said Direct Marketing Services now plans to contact consumers.

This hack might have stayed quiet except for online chatter detected in June by Affinion Group Inc.'s CardCops, a group of investigators who track payment-card theft for financial institutions. In Internet chat rooms frequented by card thieves, CardCops spotted hackers touting the sale of 200,000 payment cards belonging to one merchant. CardCops then intercepted several hundred of the records, along with the online handles belonging to hackers whose real names remain unknown.

Along with the card numbers, their three-digit "security codes" and expiration dates, the thieves had the cardholders' names, addresses and phone numbers. The data had been organized in the same way, indicating the numbers likely came from the same database. CardCops' president, Dan Clements, also noticed that the vast majority of the cardholders were women, a clue that the records came from a merchant catering to a certain demographic.

When he began calling them, the first eight said they had bought things online or through mail order from Montgomery Ward. At that point, Clements realized, "there's a high probability the entire database of Montgomery Ward was breached."

It is not clear to Clements, though, whether the hackers were inflating their claim when they offered 200,000 records or whether Milgrom's number of 51,000 is accurate.

The credit card industry's response to the breach varied.

A spokeswoman for Discover Financial Services LLC, Mai Lee Ua, said her company had addressed the problem by sending new cards to its cardholders who appeared in the compromised records. Ua said they weren't told which merchant had been breached.

Visa declined to comment. MasterCard issued a statement Friday acknowledging it was aware of the breach at Direct Marketing Services, and had notified the banks that issue MasterCards, telling them to monitor the accounts for suspicious charges.

Linda Jeffers of Latrobe, Pa., decided not to take any chances in waiting. Jeffers, a MasterCard cardholder whose data were found online, canceled her card this month after being contacted by CardCops.

She told the AP she had used the card for Internet shopping only once, from her son’s computer - she bought a desk from Montgomery Ward - and was surprised to hear her account had been compromised.

Such silence was the norm in the industry for years. But in response to fears of identity theft, 44 states have passed laws that generally require organizations holding consumer data to tell people when their information has leaked, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Clements and other security analysts say that despite those laws, many breaches still are kept quiet, judging by the data being hawked in online black markets. Avivah Litan, an analyst at Gartner Inc., believes unreported data breaches might still outnumber the ones that do get publicized.

Litan says it especially is the case with online merchants. She believes it happens because of a lack of pressure from credit card companies, which are not responsible for fraudulent charges in "card not present" transactions over the Web and mail order. Until fraud actually appears on the card, they’d rather avoid the cost of voiding compromised cards and giving consumers new ones, she said.

"What it reveals is the convoluted banking system," she said. "If this had taken place at a grocery store, we all would have heard about it."

In fact, because of the silence that still sometimes follows data breaches, even people who have never been informed one of their records has leaked should assume their information is floating online, Litan said.

"Probably every one of our cards is up there somewhere now," she said.

He Said, She Said: Which Is It? Facebook Asks

Social network site Facebook will press members to declare whether they are male or female, seeking to end the grammatical device that leads the site to refer to individual users as "they" or "themself."

The Internet phenomenon, which boasts 80 million users worldwide, exploded in popularity over the past year as a convenient way for Web users to communicate and share personal details with selected groups of friends or acquaintances.

But grammatical errors in the automated messages Facebook uses to personalize pronouns when members share information with their friends have proliferated since the site expanded from English-only into 15 new languages in recent months.

"We've gotten feedback from translators and users in other countries that translations wind up being too confusing when people have not specified a sex on their profiles," Facebook product manager Naomi Gleit said in a company statement.

In English, when users fail to specify what gender they are, Facebook defaults to some form of the gender neutral, plural pronoun "they." That option is unavailable when the plural is always masculine or feminine in other languages.

"People who haven't selected what sex they are frequently get defaulted to the wrong sex," Gleit wrote.

Unless the gender of the user is clear, Facebook does not know which pronoun to use to notify other members add information to the site. This common English problem is multiplied in languages where masculine and feminine distinctions are grammatically ingrained.

The site will now let users specify whether they are male or female on their basic membership profile. It will prompt existing users to define themselves.

Facebook has an opt-out option for members who choose not to specify their gender or do not consider gender to be clear cut. Members can remove mention of gender from messages about their activities.

"We've received pushback in the past from groups that find the male/female distinction too limiting," Gleit said.

The option is similar to a feature that lets members hide birthdays or the year they were born, a spokeswoman added.

Workplaces To See More Spats Over After-Hours

Should an employee get paid for reading a BlackBerry at the dinner table, sending an office e-mail or posting a job-related blog at home?

A spat at ABC News over paying writers to check their BlackBerries on their own time recently raised the issue, and such a dispute marks the leading edge of a deluge of unresolved and potentially heated cases to come in the United States, experts say.

The growing technical ability to work remotely, combined the growth of work-related legal disputes, is raising "lots of smaller-scope issues of this kind," said John Thompson, an expert in wage and hour law at Fisher & Phillips in Atlanta.

"We've never seen anything like it. Just the question of what is work and what isn't is a practically endless question," he said. "It is going to drive to the surface all kinds of issues that nobody's ever thought of before."

At ABC, under a longstanding contract waiver, writers who sporadically checked their BlackBerries after hours did not incur time-and-a-half overtime pay.

The union, the Writers Guild of America, East, challenged the waiver

when three new writers were hired, and the company responded by taking away all writers’ BlackBerries, ABC said.

The waiver was quickly reinstated, said Jeffrey Schneider, senior vice president of ABC News.

"We’re glad to be back to the status quo where people can still check their BlackBerries and stay read in without incurring time-and-a-half overtime, which turns very quickly into a very big bill for a news division like ours," he said.

"We absolutely want to compensate people for overtime that they work, but that does not cover simply checking your e-mail," he added. "That would cover substantial work that gets done."

Simply checking a BlackBerry was not the union’s concern, said Lowell Peterson, executive director of the Writers Guild, East. "Our folks are professionals. They’re not going to start putting in overtime slips for 2.1 minutes.

"Our concern is we don’t want this to grow into a major work commitment that people don’t get paid for," he said.

The issue is not so much tapping out a brief message on a BlackBerry; it’s the ability to write articles, post blogs, draft documents, research the Internet or sign contracts, all on a tiny, mobile, handheld gadget, experts say.

"Technology is going to continue to move in that direction," Peterson said. "It was important to us to make it clear that here’s where we stand. This is not going to become an unpaid 24-7 workplace."

Productivity expert Laura Stack has little sympathy for the employee side of the argument.

"Show me one employee who doesn’t waste time at work," the Colorado-based author said. "I see so much abuse of working hours by employees - personal phone calls, socializing, checking eBay listings, booking personal travel, etc. - that I don’t believe it’s unreasonable for an employer to want a bit of work on personal hours.

"If you don’t want to be on call, don’t be a doctor, a computer technician, or a reporter," she added.

As technology moves ahead, and the days when "having a pager was a great big deal" are gone, said Peterson, "We’re going to have to trust people’s common sense, on both sides."

Legal expert Thompson said many of the disputes could be decided on the basis of what in law is called "de minimis."

"What that means is, ’Is it too trivial for the law to mess with?"’ he said.

Many cases, he said, arise when employees grow unhappy at work. "It’s fine as long as everybody’s happy," he said. "Once they cease being happy, they want to make an issue of it."

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